

Ex-death row inmates seeking moratorium

WASHINGTON (AP)—Darby Tillis got off death row when his fifth trial on two murder charges finally yielded an acquittal. A DNA test freed Ronald Jones from a death sentence for raping and murdering a young mother. Gary Gauger escaped execution when an appeals court overturned his conviction for slitting his parents' throats.

The three wrongfully convicted men are among 13 released from Illinois' death row since 1987 — more people than have been executed by that state since the Supreme Court allowed the reinstatement of capital punishment. The lopsided record prompted the state's governor to call in January for a moratorium on executions in Illinois until problems with the system could be sorted out.

On Wednesday, Tillis, Jones and Gauger came to Congress to seek a nationwide halt to capital punishment until stronger safeguards are in place to ensure innocent people aren't executed.

"You cannot bring a man back from the grave after you find those errors," Tillis said.

Legislation sponsored by Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr., D-Ill., would immediately suspend all executions by the federal government and the states for seven years. To get Justice Department permission to resume executions, states would have to provide access to DNA testing to everyone on death row who asks for it.

Other pending measures in the House and Senate also seek protections for capital defendants but do not call for a moratorium.

Illinois Gov. George Ryan released a statement praising Jackson's bill as a step toward "ensuring that everyone accused of a crime is treated fairly before the law."

Though there has not been a federal execution since 1963, the number of people put to death by the states is increasing. There are 3,600 people on death rows nationwide. Meanwhile, 87 have been freed since 1973,

according to the Washington-based Death Penalty Information Center.

Gauger was convicted in his parents' murders on their Illinois farm in 1993. Police told him they had evidence linking him to the crime and he made what he said was a hypothetical statement about blacking out that was used as a confession. A state appeals court overturned his conviction in 1996, and two gang members from Wisconsin have since been charged with the murders.

Jones, a homeless, alcoholic panhandler, confessed to and was convicted for the 1985 killing of a mother of three. He later recanted, saying he made up a story so police would stop beating him. He was released from death row last year after DNA testing proved he didn't do it.

Tillis and his co-defendant, Perry Cobb, were arrested for the murder of two men during a 1977 robbery at a Chicago hot-dog stand. Because of a lack of physical evidence

and dubious witness testimony, it took three trials to send them to death row.

Their convictions eventually were overturned, another trial ended in a hung jury, then a judge acquitted the men in 1987 - after they spent more than nine years in jail.

"Death row is a horrible shock," said Tillis, now a minister who formed a group to help former death-row inmates readjust to society.

Anthony Porter, once two days from being executed, was released from prison late last year. He had been on death row for 16 years when several Northwestern University journalism classmates helped prove another man committed the double murder for which he was convicted. One of those students, Shawn Armbrust, said today's scattershot approach to fixing mistakes must be changed.

"That's not how the system is supposed to work," Armbrust said. "Twenty-one-year-olds are not supposed to be responsible for finding the innocent people on death row."

Census

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at stake than money. The actual geographic boundaries of legislative districts are based largely on census figures. The assemblymen who represent predominately black districts 6 and 7 understand the ramifications for their areas, which are unique to Clark County as "single-senate" districts. As such, both are represented by one senator. An accurate census count might lead to a second.

"I sent mine in!" laughed the lone black state senator, Joe Neal (D-District 4), speaking of the questionnaire he received in the mail. But, quickly striking a serious tone, Neal continued: "I think it's necessary for people to participate, since a lot of benefits that derive from the federal government are based on the number of people. It'd be worth our while to participate."

"We need to go to work even harder," said Assemblyman Morse Arberry (D-District 7). "I was talking to the Secretary of State last week discussing this. It's about the dollar. We will be shortchanged if we don't have the numbers. We'll be left out in the cold."

His colleague, Assemblyman Wendell Williams (D-District 6), said: "There's always an undercount in minority communities. In the past, the census bureau didn't utilize people from the community, and now they're starting to get the message."

This is where Anderson comes in. She has been more like an evangelist than a bureaucrat in her approach, having penetrated information media: newspaper, radio and TV, talked to numerous church groups, and carried the



Photo special to the Sentinel-Voice
Louis Conner Jr., a KCEP Power 88.1 FM radio personality, adjusts equipment during the station's live remote broadcast at West Middle Schhol.

message of census participation to 'civic, community and social organizations.

"Drastic means for drastic situations," she said. "I go and I show up because we can't sit around and wait for something to be handed to us. I've been going from church to church. I've written letters to the pastors. It's very important that we get those forms mailed in this week, otherwise they'll fall into the 'non-response follow-up' category."

The project's next phase will focus on residents who didn't return questionnaires received by mail. Another attempt will be made to count them, this time via door-to-door enumerators.

"If you fall into that category," Anderson explained, "and you're contacted, open the door, cooperate with the census-taker. And I must stress this point: count everyone in the household."

Apparently, according to Anderson, not all blacks in Nevada have been quite so cavalier regarding the census. "In northern Nevada I'm seeing the African-American

community come together and get involved. In southern Nevada we're lagging behind. Even northern Nevada is beating us in terms of involvement," she said.

This raises provocative questions about motivation, and not only that, but skepticism as well, and many other reasons given to explain the reticence of blacks to respond.

"We're skeptical of the federal government and have been victims of it," said Williams, "but we are citizens and we have to struggle to achieve prosperity in this country, and this is how. We have to get African-American citizens' groups to get the word out that this is a good thing."

"In our community we have a distrust of

government," noted Weekly, who pointed out another counterproductive factor. "If we don't think it affects us we don't seem to care," he observed, then continued hopefully, to say, "but I'm optimistic. I think we're going to do our best to raise the awareness, and I believe we'll get our numbers up."

Arberry, who is chairman of the legislature's Interim Finance Committee, indicated that body recently designated \$20,000 for census education and participation, and that this appropriation was merely part of a much larger effort.

"We appropriated roughly \$800,000 for advertising and public information to get people involved and to overcome their fears," he

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Whitman orders study of economic inequity

TRENTON, N.J. (AP) - Gov. Christie Whitman last Thursday created a commission to study how minorities have been left out of the state's economic success.

Whitman ordered the review of past racial discrimination in the state's business community in part to provide evidence for supporting an affirmative action plan.

"There is no better opportunity than the one at hand to diversify and intensify economic opportunities and prosperity as an insurance policy against national and regional economic woes," Whitman said in a statement.

The governor also directed state agencies and authorities to find ways to develop new economic programs.

Whitman wants the 22-member commission to update and expand current studies used in the state's procurement programs for businesses owned by minorities and women.

A federal judge in February struck down what is called a "set-aside" requiring casinos to reserve at least 15 percent of their contracts for companies headed by women or minorities.

A lawsuit to fight the rule was brought by an association of area contractors who did not qualify for the set-aside, including construction contractors claiming their low bids were rejected. The judge found the set-aside to be unconstitutional because it created an "unequal playing field."

The governor later said a study would provide the evidence that administration lawyers need to defend in court New Jersey's affirmative action business programs at Atlantic City casinos and elsewhere in state and perhaps local government.

Whitman said the key to defending such programs is evidence that supports them.

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